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Green Looks Good on You: The Rhetoric and Moral Identity of Conscious Consumption Blogs

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**Green Looks Good on You: The Rhetoric and Moral Identity of Conscious
Consumption Blogs**

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In Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in
Environmental Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

I came to this topic because of a personal conundrum. As an American, I live in a consumerist society, where daily life revolves around buying things, talking about buying things, and working to earn money with which to buy things. As an environmentalist, I'm concerned overconsumption is destroying the Earth. Documentaries about the polluting fast fashion and agricultural industries capture my attention and make me feel guilty. I have learned to blame myself for the excessive energy and material resources that go into making, packaging and shipping the products I buy, as well as the waste created when I dispose of them. Luckily, there is no shortage of guilt-easing solutions offered to me by environmental campaigns. I can calculate my individual carbon footprint, recycle my plastic containers, bring reusable bags to the supermarket, take shorter showers, and switch to eating organic food. I am told I can slow the negative environmental impacts of industry by modifying my consumption habits and convincing others to do the same.

It can be encouraging to see the purchase and use of eco-friendly goods grow. But is it evidence of environmental progress? These days almost every student and young professional in the USA carries a reusable water bottle— but according to a 2015 market report by the Beverage Marketing Corporation, consumption of single-use plastic water bottles has actually increased in the past decade.¹ It seems environmentalism has developed a persistent focus on individual spending behavior while paying little attention to the powerful structures which govern consumption and its environmental impact.

¹ J. G. Rodwan Jr, "Bottled Water 2014: Reinvigoration, US and international developments and statistics" (*Bottled Water Reporter*, 2015), 11-19.

Proponents of eco-friendly consumption behavior, especially the bloggers, startup CEOs, and TED talk presenters at its forefront, tend to use the term “conscious” consumption to encompass not only environmental sustainability but also other principles, including: ethics, human rights, animal rights, veganism, minimalism, spirituality, financial well-being, emotional well-being, and physical health. So-called conscious consumption blogs offer ways to address several or all of these concerns through individual lifestyle changes. “Lifestyle” here mainly refers to leisure consumption—the blogs’ content is typically concerned with fashion, grooming, diet, household products and/or travel.

In this paper I conduct case studies and language analysis of YouTube transcripts, exploring to what extent conscious consumption blogs are political. Conscious consumption bloggers utilize digital media like YouTube and Instagram to construct moral identities around consumption habits, encouraging followers to emulate their behavior. I found that conscious consumption blogs contain strong themes of personal well-being, responsibility, and consumer choice, which uphold the narrative of consumption as activism. As a result, conscious consumers can perform environmentalism without actually critiquing the legal, corporate and otherwise structural causes of environmental degradation. In the meantime, companies which market eco-friendly and/or ethically made products continue to grow their profits. Ultimately, conscious consumption blogs uphold a depoliticized kind of environmentalism by moralizing and exaggerating the importance of purchasing behavior.

BACKGROUND

Earth is facing several major human-caused environmental threats, including but not limited to: climate change, depletion of freshwater resources, pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and desertification.^{2 3 4} In the face of a global environmental crisis, humans must figure out a drastically different way to interact with the environment.

The publishing of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962 brought about a wave of American environmentalism characterized by anxiety about environmental catastrophes, heightened by a lack of either strong scientific research or structural environmental regulation.⁵ In the 1970s, public awareness of pollution and ecological degradation grew, resulting in the formation of the US Environmental Protection Agency and the passing of several hallmark pieces of environmental legislation: the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and others. As the 20th century went on, global environmental issues became common knowledge and their shock value wore off. Problems like large-scale pollution took a back seat to more immediate social and economic issues like jobs, crime, education, healthcare, finance, and technology.⁶

In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a document called *Our Common Future*, frequently referred to as the Brundtland report. The report coined the term “sustainable development,” which it defines as “development that meets the needs of the present

² Jonathan Foley et al., "Global consequences of land use" (*Science*, 2005).

³ Martin Scheffer et al., "Catastrophic shifts in ecosystems" (*Nature*, 2001).

⁴ E. Churchill, "Environmental degradation and human well-being: Report of the millennium ecosystem assessment" (*Popul. Dev*, 2005).

⁵ Timothy O'Riordan, "From environmentalism to sustainability" (*Scottish Geographical Journal* 1999), 154.

⁶ O'Riordan, "From environmentalism to sustainability" 155

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁷ In the 1990s, author John Elkington more fully articulated some of the WCED’s ideas by introducing the idea of the “triple bottom line,” a framework which can be used to evaluate businesses or other organizations using three criteria: economic, social and environmental.⁸ Sustainable development—the idea that environmental protection, economic growth, and political and social stability can all be achieved jointly—has only expanded in interpretation and popularity since the Brundtland report.

Given that economic policies in the global North can be directly linked to climate change,⁹ environmentalists living in countries like the USA feel implicated in the problem and want to help bring about solutions. But even for the most educated, privileged Americans and Europeans, it can be difficult to devise solutions to environmental problems in the ideological context of a system which is responsible for creating them in the first place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars, scientists and activists alike debate what should inform the tactics of environmentalism. As a concept, sustainability has come to function as a substitute for environmentalism, particularly where it pertains to a merging of interests between environmentalism and economics, government or social groups. Economist Tim Jackson suggests that the market can grow sustainably if material resource use is decoupled from

⁷ Gro Harlem Brundtland, *Report of the World Commission on environment and development: our common future*. (United Nations, 1987).

⁸ John Elkington, "Enter the triple bottom line." In *The triple bottom line* (Routledge, 2013), 23-38.

⁹ Naomi Klein, "This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate." *Energy Law Journal* 36 (1970), 147.

economic growth.¹⁰ On the other hand, scholars and climate activists argue that climate change is a direct result of, and therefore cannot be solved under, the neoliberal policies which rule the global economy.¹¹ Furthermore, our personal viewpoints and practices are shaped by those same powerful institutions and economic policies. Brown theorizes that neoliberal ideology forces individuals to see themselves primarily as consumers, limiting the democratic power of citizens to enact social change.¹² As a result, consuming “consciously” with the goal of making social and environmental impacts through purchasing behavior has become a favored tactic of environmentalists.¹³

Environmentalism and Sustainability

There is still no clear consensus among scholars, activists and policymakers on exactly what sustainability is—a goal, a philosophy, a business practice, a set of individual actions?—who is primarily responsible for pursuing it, and how exactly it can be achieved. Depending on the context, “sustainable” may be used flexibly and interchangeably with “green,” “comprehensive,” “community oriented” or “long-lasting.”

O’Riordan examines how the movement for sustainability interprets long-established environmentalist values. He describes the fundamentals of environmentalism as encompassing two interacting sets of positions: ecocentrism and technocentrism (also called interventionism). Ecocentrism takes a holistic, ecological

¹⁰ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without growth: foundations for the economy of tomorrow*. (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

¹¹ Klein, *This Changes Everything*

¹² Wendy Brown, *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. (MIT Press, 2015).

¹³ Michael F. Maniates, "Individualization: Plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world?" (*Global environmental politics*, 2001), 31-52.

view of humans' relationship to the world, placing value on experience, balance, relationships and natural processes. Technocentrism positions humans as dominant over ecosystems, placing value on human inventiveness, growth, and efficiency as forms of environmental stewardship.¹⁴ According to O'Riordan, the coupling of science into the civic world, the expanding role of NGOs, and transformation of regulation all contributed to the shift in mainstream environmentalism towards sustainability.¹⁵ While both the technocentric and ecocentric philosophies laid the groundwork, sustainability's ethos can be likened more closely to technocentrism for its emphasis on economic growth and human development.

Economist Tim Jackson argues that the current model of economic growth is incompatible with Earth's planetary boundaries. Instead, he proposes a decoupling of economic growth and material resource consumption.¹⁶ In Jackson's vision of sustainability, steady economic growth can continue as economies find new ways to generate profits using fewer natural resources. In his role in the UK Sustainable Development Coalition (SDC), Jackson has helped to publish reports like which outline policy approaches to increase market regulation by the government, institutionalizing sustainability as a basic requirement for all public and private activity.^{17 18 19}

Naomi Klein warns that free market principles like privatization, deregulation, and tax cuts are the biggest impediments to climate response. She emphasizes a direct

¹⁴ O'Riordan, "From Environmentalism to Sustainability" 152

¹⁵ O'Riordan, "From Environmentalism to Sustainability" 156-157

¹⁶ Jackson, "16 Sustainable consumption" (*Handbook of sustainable development*, 2007), 254.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: the Transition to a Sustainable Economy* (2009)

¹⁸ Jackson, *Making Sustainable Lives Easier* (2011)

¹⁹ Claire Monkhouse and Sue Dibb, "Making sustainable lives easier: a priority for governments, business and society" (2011).

link between the intensification of environmental crises and the rise of neoliberal economic policies since the 1980s.²⁰ According to Klein, the inordinate global power of institutions like the World Trade Organization undermine potential for place-based community organizing and environmental stewardship in favor of profits for the richest corporations and economies.^{21 22}

Neoliberalism and Consumer Identity

One popular interpretation of sustainability is a sort of green consumer movement. A growing number of consumers have begun to advocate for eco-friendly consumption habits as the primary response to environmental degradation. This shift toward eco-friendly consumption, often lumped under the umbrella of “conscious consumption,” is motivated by the perception that individuals can lessen environmental degradation by harnessing consumer power.²³ Here I examine how scholars have understood the ways consumerism, capitalism, and neoliberal ideology shape perceptions of identity, obligation and agency.

Heilbroner theorizes that capitalism is not just an economic principle but a powerful regime, defined and maintained by a drive for unlimited acquisition of capital.²⁴ Citing John Locke, Heilbroner writes that in order for this type of ceaseless growth to be possible, private acquisition is viewed not as a zero-sum game (in which one party’s gain

²⁰ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 43, 72.

²¹ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 80, 85.

²² Shane Gunster, “This changes everything: Capitalism vs the climate” (2017), 136-38.

²³ Maniates, “Everyday possibilities” (*Global Environmental Politics*, 2012), 121-25.

²⁴ Robert L. Heilbroner, “The Ideology of Capital” in *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1985), 107-140.

is another's loss) but as an activity which carries the potential to benefit everyone (all economic activity is good for “the market” which represents the good of society). This “de-moralization” of economic activity justifies private acquisition as an end unto itself, with no need to consider who may benefit or be harmed with each transaction.²⁵

Heilbroner also describes how capitalism subsumes and commodifies every possible aspect of social life, including how we govern and define ourselves. Each capitalist actor thinks of him or herself as isolated and purely self-interested, defining most interactions and relationships in economic terms. This, says Heilbroner, is the basis for economic liberalism, under which government regulation should be limited and the free market is the most important social realm. Citizens of the capitalist regime which Heilbroner describes conflate their political identities—freedom to effect social change through voice in government—with economic freedom—the freedom to buy and sell.

Neoliberalism is today’s return to the classical liberal economic ideals Heilbroner describes. Neoliberalism came about in connection with several events: the end of Bretton Woods in the 1970s, the 1982 Latin American debt crisis, the 1989 fall of the Soviet Union, and the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.²⁶ Today, neoliberalism functions through policies like NAFTA and other free trade agreements, emphasis on property rights, and privatization of state-owned enterprises.²⁷

Brown positions neoliberalism at fundamental odds with the values of democracy.

²⁸ Like Heilbroner, she argues that neoliberal ideology can imagine human beings only as

²⁵ Heilbroner, “The Ideology of Capital”

²⁶ Nancy Neiman Auerbach, “The meanings of neoliberalism” in *Neoliberalism: national and regional experiments with global ideas* (Routledge, 2006), 26-50.

²⁷ Auerbach, “The Meanings of neoliberalism,” 37

²⁸ Brown, *Undoing the demos*.

market actors, whose value is measured in economic terms. Brown articulates the relationship between capitalism and liberal values in a modern context, warning “neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity...”²⁹ Echoing Foucault, Brown argues that neoliberalism replaces *homo politicus*, the political self, with *homo oeconomicus*, the economic self. On an institutional level, this means governments adopt business-like models and measurements, while private business expands its domain to include many aspects of life that were previously public.³⁰

Given the analyses of Heilbroner and Brown, together with Auerbach’s description of neoliberalism’s influence today, it stands to reason that people living under capitalist and neoliberal ideology may only be able to conceive of potential responses to social problems within their power (or at least perceived power) as market actors.

Sustainability as Consumption

A 2001 study conducted focus groups with university educated consumers ages eighteen through twenty five to investigate how much ethics motivate their purchase behavior.³¹ It found economic factors to influence the consumers’ actions much more than social or environmental impacts by a brand. When asked if ethics were a factor, consumers considered a corporation’s “commercial good” of providing jobs a socially responsible behavior which outweighed any socially irresponsible behavior (like polluting or providing poor labor conditions).³² Moreover, even when consumers knew of

²⁹ Brown, *Undoing the demos*, 44.

³⁰ Brown, *Undoing the demos*, 34, 39.

³¹ Marylyn Carrigan and Ahmad Attalla, "The myth of the ethical consumer—do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?" *Journal of consumer marketing* (2001), 560-578.

³² Carrigan and Attalla, "The myth of the ethical consumer," 568.

brands with social responsibility campaigns, their decision about whether or not to shop there was influenced wholly by other factors such as price and fashion trends. Overall, the study concluded that there was an inherent cynicism among consumers that prevented them from making purchases based on social responsibility, even when they were aware of brands' positive or negative behavior. The subjects rationalized so-called unethical purchasing behavior through their own self-perception that they, as individuals, would be unable to influence the behavior of corporations.³³ While this view is representative of ordinary consumers and not ones who have taken a special interest in conscious consumption, it does suggest that in general, consumers prioritize personal benefit when making purchasing decisions.

A 2016 study found that under some conditions, social responsibility can increase a company's profits, creating a market for socially responsible products.³⁴ They found that in the case of monopoly, wherein a consumer's only choice was to buy a product or boycott it altogether, corporate social responsibility did not increase profits, instead costing the company more. However, when consumers were given the choice between competing products, they considered social responsibility among other factors, mainly price.³⁵ This suggests that in competitive settings, brands have the potential to profit from social responsibility, as long as the price of the product is not too high. Many companies can conduct social responsibility (or sustainability) campaigns and still profit when those campaigns add value to the brand's image, attracting conscious consumers.

³³ Carrigan and Attalla, "The myth of the ethical consumer," 571.

³⁴ Mark Pigors and Bettina Rockenbach, "Consumer social responsibility" *Management Science* (2016), 3123-37.

³⁵ Pigors and Rockenbach, "Consumer Social Responsibility," 3132.

Maniates provides a theoretical overview of how individual consumption relates to sustainability. He explains that the movement to switch to “eco-friendly” products and consumer practices is

an increasingly dominant, largely American response to the contemporary environmental crisis. This response half-consciously understands environmental degradation as the product of *individual* shortcomings... best countered by action that is staunchly *individual* and typically *consumer-based* (buy a tree and plant it!) It embraces the notion that knotty issues of consumption, consumerism, power and responsibility can be resolved neatly and cleanly through enlightened, uncoordinated consumer choice.³⁶

He laments that so many environmentalists have interpreted sustainability as a set of individual responsibilities. This interpretation, upheld by hegemonic ideology, ignores institutions and structures of political power and represents “the dynamic ability of capitalism to commodify dissent.”³⁷ The market created for ethical or eco-conscious products is a perfect example of this. Despite evidence that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved within the context of the current economic system, eco-campaigns like H&M’s Conscious Collection have been able to attract concerned consumers, generating more profit for the corporation.^{38 39}

Klein’s work suggests there is no ethical or sustainable consumption under capitalism. Still, environmentalism’s green consumption mantra persists. To shift environmentalism towards civic action and away from individual habits, we must address, or at least understand, the context of our behavior. Putnam’s theory of decline in

³⁶ Maniates, “Individualization,” 33.

³⁷ Maniates, “Individualization,” 33.

³⁸ Klein, *This Changes Everything*

³⁹ Hye-Shin Kim and Martha L. Hall, “Green brand strategies in the fashion industry” in *Sustainable Fashion Supply Chain Management* (Springer, Cham, 2015), 31-45.

civic life (social capital) may be one way to understand this. He posits that social capital, built on trusting relationships with community members, is necessary to cultivate citizenship. In its absence, communities falter and individuals are unable to fully realize their democratic power.⁴⁰ Steinberg's theory of citizen-led institutional change in *Who Rules the Earth?* provides an antidote to this. In contrast to the conscious consumption phenomenon which he calls "recycling alone," Steinberg suggests a slew of ways everyday citizens can go about mobilize for structural environmental change.⁴¹

In this paper I aim to understand the extent to which conscious consumption blogs encourage or discourage political mobilization. Conscious consumption blogs are at the center of a particular online community where sustainable and ethical food, clothing, household products, travel, and other lifestyle choices are popularized. Through social media, bloggers build trust and credibility in the roles of salesperson, educator, life coach, and friend. Maniates cautions that this kind of noisiness of mainstream environmentalism is an artificial stand-in for real, "meaningful social action...that might alter institutional arrangements," and offers a narrow, individualized view of what it means to be an environmentalist.⁴² Through the lens of these blogs, I analyze discourse around identity, purchasing, sustainability, lifestyle, community, and activism, to investigate the forces at work in the conscious consumption movement and identify where there is a need for a shift towards a more political environmentalism.

⁴⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (Simon and Schuster, 2001).

⁴¹ Paul F. Steinberg, *Who rules the Earth?: How social rules shape our planet and our lives* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴² Maniates, "Individualization," 38.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses qualitative analysis of conscious consumption blogs to support a criticism of hegemonic ideologies (capitalism and neoliberalism). My interest in the topic comes from the ways digital media, consumerism, neoliberalism and environmentalism have shaped my own beliefs and practices.

I drew themes from across 6 conscious consumption blogs through case studies and word frequency analysis of YouTube content. The blogs/bloggers analyzed are Kristen Leotsakou of the blog *Kristen Leo*, Holly Rose of the blog *Leotie Lovely*, Verena Erin Polowy of the blog *My Green Closet*, Kate Arnell of the blog *Eco Boost*, Alden Wicker of the blog *EcoCult*, and Signe Hansen of the blog *Use Less*. Each blogger regularly posts content on her website, Instagram account, and YouTube channel (with the exception of Alden Wicker, who does not have a YouTube channel). To generally understand the identities and themes present in the blogs, I considered their Instagram feeds, posts and “about me” sections. The data from which I draw my analysis comes from YouTube videos, which are typically embedded in blog posts but also stand on their own on the bloggers’ YouTube channels. I consider YouTube videos a significant part of a blogger’s overall online presence due to the production value, conversational tone and richness of content enabled by the medium.

The case studies comprise automatically generated transcripts of six YouTube videos: two by Rose, two by Polowy, and two by Leotsakou. My close reading is based upon the use of certain words, phrases, conceptual relationships and overall argument. I chose videos relating to consumption and/or environmentalism, coding words and

phrases into thematic groups. I began with two categories in mind: language that is either depoliticized, individual, and materialistic; or political, collective, and anti-capitalist. Immediately most words and phrases fell into the first category, so I devised more specific groups as they emerged from the close reading process.

In addition, I used WordClouds.com, an online word cloud software, to generate a list of the most frequently used words in the transcripts of fifty YouTube videos (ten per blogger minus Wicker). The resulting data set is a list of all the words mentioned at least twenty five times (out of 85,742 total words).⁴³ I use this data along with my close reading of the six case study videos to construct a narrative of what I see as the blogs' central shared messages. The list of word frequencies, close analysis of six YouTube transcripts, and case study of Alden Wicker's article "Conscious consumerism is a lie. Here's a better way to help save the world" together form the basis for this paper.

⁴³ See appendix.

CHAPTER I

The Language of Individual Responsibility

The way conscious consumption blogs treat sustainability tends more toward marketing than activism. As an environmentalist strategy, conscious consumption disproportionately centers the consumer angle, constructing personal possessions as symbols of sustainability. Language analysis reveals strong individualistic messages about personal belief, preference, and benefit which overwhelm any sense of communal good. Instead, motivation is tied to personal morals (holding oneself accountable for the environmental impact of consumption). In place of organized action, the goal of conscious consumption is self-fulfillment as a result of progressing on one's personal journey. This is encouraged through self-education, voluntary awareness campaigns and leading by example. Overall, conscious consumption blogs' strong emphasis on self improvement contributes to individualization of responsibility, discouraging followers from collectively imagining new political possibilities outside of individual households.⁴⁴

The Who, Why and How of Conscious Consumption Blogs

The bloggers themselves tend to be young, white, female, college-educated, and live in either Europe, Australia or North America. Conscious or not, lifestyle bloggers are seldom working class— Creating high quality online content is time consuming but rarely provides a steady income on its own. Still, some (like Verena Erin Polowy) earn enough money from ads and sponsorships to make blogging a full-time job. For sponsored content to be effective at reaching a blogger's audience, she must advertise a

⁴⁴ Maniates, "Individualization"

product or service in a way that aligns with her personal brand.⁴⁵ As a result, successful lifestyle blogs can inevitably be platforms for self promotion. Content is chiefly about what one person can do to curate the perfect consumer lifestyle for herself, not about how she might go about addressing sustainability on a systems level.

Conscious consumption blogs typically follow the same format as conventional lifestyle blogs, posting content about new purchases, product reviews, haul videos, monthly favorites, wardrobe tours, recipe videos, makeup tutorials, and the like. In some cases, the only significant difference between “conscious” content and that of conventional lifestyle blogs is whether the brands featured market themselves as ethical or environmentally responsible. There is also a tonal difference: Conscious consumption blogs emphasize how a person can be in good moral conscience and achieve the satisfaction of leisure consumption together as a win-win. Sometimes the message of conscious consumption blogs is about buying less; sometimes the message is just to consume differently (buy from eco-friendly brands instead of conventional ones). Either way, consumption behavior is always the focal point. Below I will explore these common themes and the narrative they form.

My coding of six YouTube video transcripts resulted in the following thematic groups: consumers, personal benefit (wellness and financial), morals, personal journey, buying alternative products, self-educating, opting out, industry, government/citizenship, and environment. For example, health words, like “healthy” and “non-toxic” go under personal well-being. Phrases like “buy less” and “stop shopping” go in the group I call

⁴⁵ Elzbieta Lepkowska-White and Emily Kortright, "The business of blogging: Effective approaches of women food bloggers" (*Journal of Foodservice Business Research* 21, no. 3, 2018), 257-79.

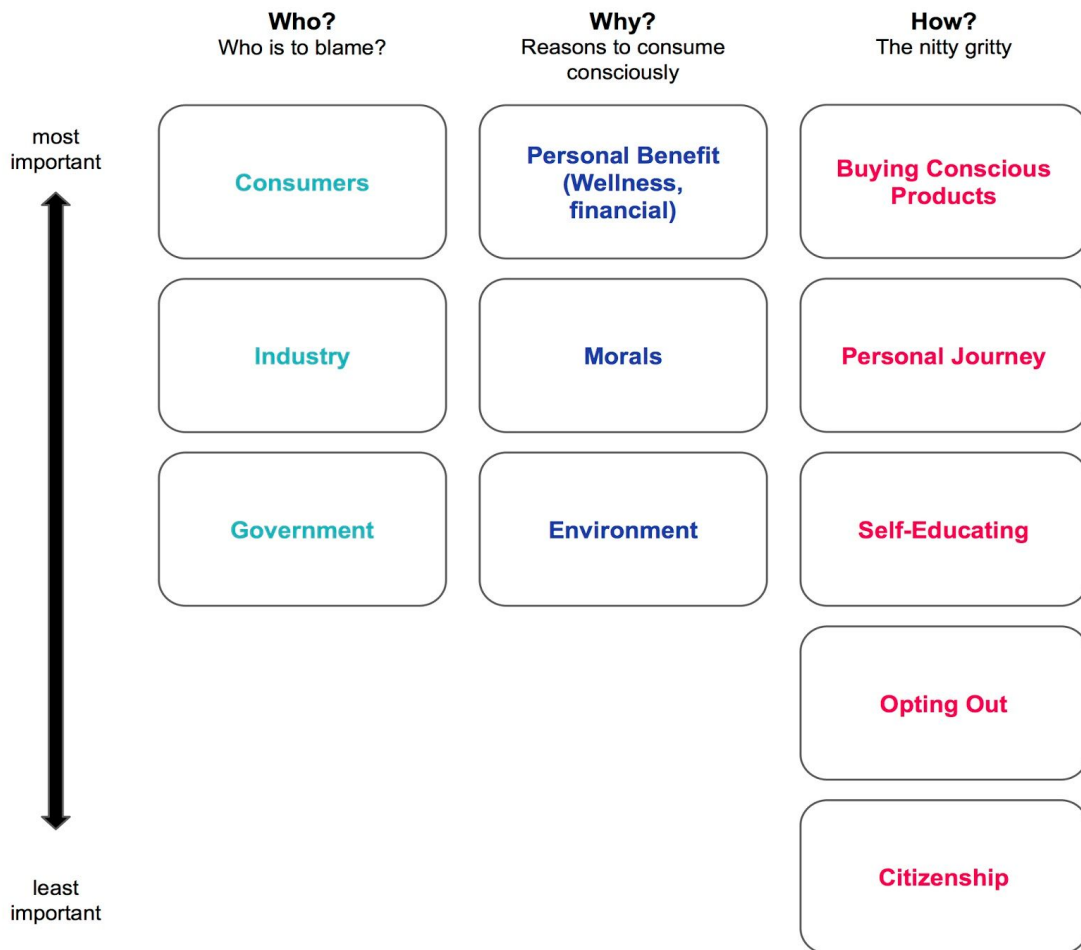
opting out, since those phrases are used in instances to persuade followers not to participate in consumption.

Consumers Materialistic Superficial overconsumption	Personal Well-Being (Physical and Financial) Natural Non-toxic Healthy Disgusting Minimalism Simplifying your life Cheaper On a budget Save money	Buying Conscious Products Shopping Brand Lifestyle change Option Switch Buy Replace Alternative Vote with your wallet
Corporate Greed Profit Corporations Company	Environment Green Sustainable Pollution Carbon Planet Environmentally friendly	Personal Journey If possible Easy, easier Difficult Easy steps Baby steps Journey
Government & Citizenship Call your representative Donate to an NGO Volunteer Regulations	Personal Morals, Ethics and Human rights Ethical Labor Wage Factory workers Be the change we wish to see I believe	Opting Out Stop shopping Consume/buy less Avoid Reduce Reuse repair
Self-Education Awareness Documentary Book		

Thematic categories resulting from close reading/coding of six transcripts of YouTube videos: “30 Sustainable Resolution Ideas” “My Green Closet - Conscious Consumerism is a Lie?” (Polowy 2017) “4 REASONS I PAY A VOLUNTARY CARBON TAX” (Rose 2017) “4 Resolutions You Need To Set For 2018!” “3 Popular Companies That HATE You” (Leotsakou 2017) “WORST OF YOUTUBE | HAULS” (Leotsakou 2015). Category names are bolded, non-bolded words are taken directly from transcripts.

After clustering words and phrases into groups, I organized those groups into three categories—the who, why, and how of conscious consumption. First, who is to blame for the environmental problems that warrant conscious consumption? Consumers, industry,

and government go into this category, based on which of those three subjects seem to hold the most weight and importance. Next, why should people consume consciously? This category is where I place personal benefit, morals, and the environment, since all of these things are referenced as justifications, especially different types of personal gain (financial as well as physical and other types of personal wellness). Finally, how does one actualize the role of conscious consumer? This category is where I place action item groups: Specific recommendations like where to shop as well as how to measure and evaluate purchases are some of the methods and mechanisms of conscious consumption.



A visual organization of the thematic groups resulting from close language analysis/coding into the who, why, and how of conscious consumption, from most to least important.

The “government and citizenship” group became two separate groups, as I feel “government” can be regarded as a subject while “citizenship” is a set of actions. The group I called “corporate greed” was changed to “industry” because references to corporate greed were the only times industry was mentioned as an active subject.

To ground my analysis in a broader data set, I also used a word cloud generator to determine which words are generally common in conscious consumption videos.⁴⁶ The results are consistent with the narrative of depoliticization I describe in my close reading analysis. Among the most common are words and phrases like “personal,” “happy,” “health,” “easy,” and “love,” which fall conceptually under personal well-being. Slightly less common—but still mentioned over thirty times—are words like “support,” “ethics,” and “care,” which could be related to personal moral obligation. While sustainability is purportedly one of the core tenets of conscious consumption blogs, most content deals more explicitly with aesthetic and concern for individual preferences over lasting impact. Topics addressed in the videos span fashion, femininity, motherhood, minimalism, diet, interior design, health, fitness, and beauty. On the other hand, systems, institutions, organizing, law, structural power, and the environment itself are infrequently mentioned. Personal benefit stands out as a major theme, and emphasis on individual choice is a common thread through the who, why and how of conscious consumption. Attention is overwhelmingly paid to the individual, sometimes extending to the family or household, but rarely to the community.

⁴⁶ See appendix.

Consumer Behavior as Moral

The language of conscious consumption blogs includes frequent reminders that consumption should be motivated by a personal belief system. This can be signaled by phrases like “I don’t believe in,” “I can’t support,” “we shouldn’t support,” or “be the change you wish to see.” Moralization of purchasing behavior works directly to support the precept of personal lifestyle modification. Consider this portion of the blog Leotie Lovely’s “About” section, where she gives readers an overview of her blog:

I believe that in order to be the change we wish to see, each individual needs to learn the circular story behind every object they purchase or use, and I’ve dedicated myself to recounting that narrative. I try to weave together an aesthetic and digestible tale about the people, places, and products which provide sustainable solutions for our lives and planet. Each story is a new discovery on my own path towards a greater state of eco-wisdom and ethical awareness and unearths technologies and businesses which problem solve pollution. My hope is to guide my readers to vote for positive change with their dollar and motivate businesses of all sizes to overhaul their production processes for the greener good (Rose).

First, Rose’s credo perfectly encapsulates the “who” of the conscious consumer movement. Who is responsible for industrial pollution? Who has the power to fight against it? In order to “problem solve pollution,” Rose writes, it is consumers who must “vote for positive change with their dollar,” which will in turn “motivate businesses” to stop polluting. The narrative she constructs around consumption and pollution ignores the real issues of sustainability: exploitation and environmental justice, disproportionate corporate power allowed by economically conservative policy, the potential for governments to regulate environmental pollution, and non-economic ways for citizen

bodies to hold polluters accountable.⁴⁷ Instead, she focuses solely on consumer power. Still, Rose's interpretation of sustainability could be likened to technocentrism— she underscores the role of technologies and businesses, who presumably will be able to grow and succeed alongside environmentalism.^{48 49} When bloggers frame problems such as pollution or human rights abuse as the product of consumers' personal moral responsibility, individual lifestyle changes seem like the only logical solution.

In Kristen Leotsakou's video "WORST OF YOUTUBE | HAULS" she indicts haul videos, a popular style of YouTube video in which bloggers record themselves showing off recent purchases. These videos are problematic, says Leotsakou, because

overconsumption obviously has an impact on the environment. When you buy a lot of stuff... all that stuff is made in factories— factories in usually third world countries— that abuse the environment, have no regulations on the protection of the environment, and are polluting it. And sometimes not because they want to, but sometimes because they don't have any other options. We are all demanding a lot of things for a very low price.

Leotsakou's central message here is to blame individual consumption habits for pollution and other environmental consequences of the fast fashion industry. The problem, she claims, is that our high demand for cheap goods is unethical; it forces companies to produce in unregulated overseas factories which mistreat workers and the environment. To reach the conclusion that personal purchases have direct moral consequences, Leotsakou is first subscribing to an idea called consumer sovereignty. Consumer sovereignty refers to the doctrine that (or instances in which) consumers are the most

⁴⁷ Klein, *This Changes Everything*

⁴⁸ O'Riordan, "From Environmentalism to Sustainability"

⁴⁹ Jackson, "Prosperity without growth"

powerful market influencers.⁵⁰ In Leotsakou's depiction of the market, fashion brands are morally neutral when it comes to responsibility, only polluting because market demand dictates it. The source of the unethical behavior is the consumer, not the government, industry, or company.

In many instances, conscious consumption bloggers do identify relevant structures of power— Leotsakou has made several videos about specific corporations and corporate practices which are to blame for environmental and social atrocities.⁵¹ ⁵² But most of the time they fail to place both the problems and solutions in a sufficiently politicized framework, instead overemphasizing the moral responsibility consumers should feel towards the impacts of industry. In effect, doing what one feels is right takes priority over doing what is most practical or impactful.

For an example of this failure, see Polowy's video "30 Sustainable Resolution Ideas." Her recommendations will be familiar to most environmentalists: buying bulk products to minimize packaging waste, switching to non-toxic cleaning products, going vegan, repairing items instead of trashing them, biking instead of driving, hosting a clothing swap, and contacting congressional representatives. All are fine suggestions. Some are political, like calling one's representative, or could be considered anti capitalist, like getting together a group of friends to host a clothing swap. But Polowy effectively depoliticizes any of these recommendations by listing them alongside consumptive acts as if they are just as valuable. Viewers see "always get your coffee in a reusable mug" followed by "support environmental NGOs" and might think, *the mug thing is easier; I'll*

⁵⁰ William H. Hutt, "The concept of consumers' sovereignty" *The Economic Journal* (1940), 66-77.

⁵¹ Kristen Leotsakou, "3 Popular Companies that HATE You" (2017).

⁵² Kristen Leotsakou, "The Richest Criminal In The World" (2017).

just do that. Either way, they get to feel good about themselves. This is “low hanging fruit” of environmentalism— small acts we perform to pat ourselves on the back without acknowledging the sacrifice and big-picture thinking meaningful change requires.⁵³

Awareness, Politeness and the Personal Journey Narrative

Conscious consumption blogs have a certain way of combining self-promotion with moral responsibility and individual awareness-raising. When making recommendations for responsible lifestyle changes, bloggers can point to more of their own content for followers to use as a helpful resource. By limiting activism to a lifetime practice of individualized strategies, conscious consumption blogs obscure big picture notions of change in favor of subjective self-evaluation— all the while ensuring a continual audience for themselves.

Leotsakou begins her video, “4 Resolutions You Need To Set For 2018!” with a call to action: “It feels like things have just been slowly getting worse and worse on this planet,” she says, and the outcome “is really completely in our hands and in the choices that we make as consumers.” Then throughout the video, she repeatedly concedes that for each person to totally transform his or her daily habits is a slow and difficult journey. Just like Polowy’s suggestion to take “baby steps,” Leotsakou acknowledges that there are structural impediments to green lifestyle changes when she says “vegan milk options are getting a lot cheaper.” The premise here is nearly impossible— an amalgamation of small, individual consumption changes is the only solution to the global environmental crisis, yet each actor is on an arduous personal journey. In Rose’s video “Angry Vegans

⁵³ Maniates, “Everyday Possibilities,” 122.

Don't Make More Vegans, Kind Vegans Do” she argues that change is best accomplished when concerned consumers (specifically vegans) modify their own diet over time. Rather than angrily and vocally expressing how industrial animal agriculture pollutes the environment and exploits workers, she favors an approach wherein vegans lead by positive example.

It's a habit and it takes a lot of education to want to change that habit. And me getting frustrated with people doesn't give them the space to be able to make the decisions themselves, it just makes them uncomfortable. So I think whether it's veganism, or going green, or any other sort of change you wish to see in the world, the absolute only way to have that change occur is by providing information...⁵⁴

Armed with information and examples of happy, healthy vegans in their lives, Rose hopes, ordinary people will be more likely to change their own habits. By the same token, Leotsakou recommends her followers consider switching to a vegan diet for reasons of personal health, the environment, and animal cruelty. As quickly as she brings up the subject of veganism, she apologizes for it, saying “dialing down my vegan rampage...”⁵⁵ This kind of polite self- tone policing allows environmentalists to feel like they have spoken out on an issue without really disrupting the status quo.⁵⁶

Through self-education, it is thought, conscious consumers will learn to correct their own unethical purchasing behavior. Leotsakou, Polowy and other conscious consumption bloggers frequently recommend followers seek out information themselves through documentaries and online research. In place of scientific-based regulation, it seems to be up to individuals to educate themselves about environmental impact and act

⁵⁴ Holly Rose, “Angry Vegans Don’t Make More Vegans, Kind Vegans Do”

⁵⁵ Kristen Leotsakou, “4 Resolutions You Need To Set For 2018!” (2017).

⁵⁶ Maniates, “Everyday Possibilities,” 40.

accordingly. In Holly Rose's video "4 REASONS I PAY A VOLUNTARY CARBON TAX" she states

I think any change comes with information. I discovered while I was doing the questionnaire on carbontax.org that I was actually having a bigger impact on the planet than I thought I was. I've been living a zero-waste lifestyle, eating a plant-based diet, recycling, taking short showers, unplugging my electronics at night, and all these different things that I discovered doing my 365 day "Gone Green" 2016 series, where I picked apart everything I do in my lifestyle and then found sustainable solutions for it. But I hadn't thought about the impact of my travel...⁵⁷

Her reasons for paying a voluntary carbon tax are the following: The money is invested in green projects, the tax discourages her from traveling too much, and it lets politicians know people are willing to pay a carbon tax. Rose is content to believe that either enough people will visit CarbonTax.org and pay the voluntary carbon tax, or politicians will take notice and enact a real one. But her strategy is still individualistic— at no point does she suggest that concerned environmentalists actually work to make carbon taxes a reality. Rather, her thought is that the pollution that comes from travel is the fault of the individual, and can be made up for through self-education and individual action.

Conscious consumption is not activism, and conflating the two is a dangerously depoliticized temptation away from civic responsibility.⁵⁸ The tenets of conscious consumption are flawed at every turn— If consumers are to blame for climate change, we should consume differently. If institutional forces beyond our control are to blame, at least living our individual lives sustainably will exonerate our consciences. Either way we fail to imagine our power to effect change outside of the consumer realm. The

⁵⁷ Holly Rose, "4 REASONS I PAY VOLUNTARY CARBON TAX" (2017).

⁵⁸ Maniates "Everyday Possibilities"

conscious consumption narrative is easy to swallow; it rarely deviates from a materialistic, individualistic self-image. As a result, even the more environment-oriented conscious consumption blogs tend to be more focused on personal well-being than collective well-being, nevermind ecosystem health.

CHAPTER II

Confronting the Need for Politicization

The first chapter examined how the language of conscious consumption blogs works to limit our understanding of environmental activism. This chapter explores instances where conscious consumption has the potential to be challenged or expanded. One of these instances occurred when *EcoCult* blogger Alden Wicker published an article criticizing conscious consumption as a mechanism for change. Furthermore, certain elements of conscious consumption, like reducing, reusing, and forming networks, carry the potential to be redefined and utilized in a framework of oppositional politics.

Is Conscious Consumption a Lie?

On March 1, 2017, Alden Wicker published an article in Quartz entitled “Conscious consumerism is a lie. Here’s a better way to help save the world.” Its main points are the following: capitalism provides structural impediments to sustainability, the impact of conscious consumption is minimal at best, and environmental progress will require us to address fundamentals of political and economic power outside the realm of individual consumption. Wicker directly addresses the flawed doctrine of the conscious consumption movement, saying

Making series of small, ethical purchasing decisions while ignoring the structural incentives for companies’ unsustainable business models won’t change the world as quickly as we want. It just makes us feel better about ourselves... But it’s no substitute for systematic change.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Alden Wicker, “Conscious consumerism is a lie. Here’s a better way to help save the world” (Quartz, 2017).

Wicker acknowledges she's not the first to come to this conclusion. She cites professor Halina Szejnwald Brown, who co-authored a report for the United Nations Environmental Programme defining sustainable lifestyles as "conditioned, facilitated, and constrained by societal "norms, political institutions, public policies, infrastructures, markets, and culture."⁶⁰

Being a fixture of the online conscious consumption community, Wicker caused a stir among her peers. The article and its subsequent buzz prompted Polowy to post a YouTube video publicly responding to Wicker's argument. She begins by emphasizing how much respect she has for *EcoCult* and summarizing Wicker's argument, saying

She talks about how change has to be systemic and the time and money that you invest in shopping more consciously could be better spent donated to organizations, volunteering with environmental organizations, getting involved with government, [and] contacting your elected representative...while I do think that's important, I also think that any problem needs to be addressed from as many angles as possible⁶¹

The consumer angle, says Polowy, is just as important as any top-down approach involving regulation. Maybe this is because she distrusts institutions— later on in the video she says "I don't have a lot of faith in governments." But judging by what she says next, Polowy is unwilling to de-emphasize the moral obligation she feels to consume consciously:

...it is so important to walk the walk and live what you believe in. For example, I do not believe in factory farming, I don't eat meat, and to me, I am just not at all comfortable with the idea of maybe eating really cheap factory farmed meat and

⁶⁰ Philip J. Vergragt et al., "Fostering and Communicating Sustainable Lifestyles: Principles and Emerging Practices" (2016), 6.

⁶¹ Verena Erin Polowy, "Conscious Consumerism Is a Lie?" (2017).

then taking the money that I saved doing that and donating it to an organization that's fighting factory farming.⁶²

To Polowy, the effectiveness of political organizing “is really hard to quantify,” whereas she measures environmental progress by the amount of compliments that turn into conversations generated by a sustainably-made item of clothing, along with the growth of small, ethical brands into successful, profit-generating businesses. She also worries that Wicker’s argument will breed apathy, as would-be conscious consumers “find an article about something that they were doing that maybe doesn't have as big of an impact as they thought it did,” throw up their hands, and quit trying altogether.

In the end, Polowy concedes that the Quartz article is valuable for starting a conversation, one which is

really great because [it makes] us think about other things that we could be doing. I think that it's pretty easy to get complacent and think that you're doing a good job and that you're doing enough, but it's important to always be trying to learn and improve.⁶³

Polowy refuses to accept the premises that small consumptive acts are ineffective and political organizing should be environmentalists’ focus. Instead, she urges her followers to practice conscious consumption *and* consider that they could be doing more in terms of political organizing. In the same breath, she acknowledges that conscious consumption involves so much time, energy, and “baby steps” that political activism seems a difficult, far-off goal.

Many in the community agreed with what Polowy had to say. In the comments section, blogger Signe Hansen of *Use Less* writes “great video, interesting points as

⁶² Polowy, “Conscious Consumerism is a Lie?”

⁶³ Polowy, “Conscious Consumerism is a Lie?”

always. Love that you empahsize [*sic*] how much power we have as consumers!”⁶⁴

Another conscious consumption blogger by the username @Shelbizleee comments

many times it is found that organizations are not using their funds in effective ways. I think voting with our dollar is the most important thing we can do. I mean... we do it each and everyday [*sic*], how could that not be the most impactful. Either way, I think doing the most you can from every angle is ideal.⁶⁵

It comes as no surprise that Polowy (and her commenters) would reject Wicker’s argument. Admitting conscious consumption is ineffective would undermine her entire brand, alienate followers and sponsors, and leave her unemployed. Instead she characterizes politics as just one small part of a broad, ambiguous environmentalism which idealizes doing whatever actions seem within reach.⁶⁶ But what about Alden Wicker? Has she abandoned *EcoCult* and taken to the streets as an environmental activist? No, she still publishes content relating to ethical fashion on her blog, along with freelance personal finance articles for publications like Newsweek. But Wicker likely understands what most of her fellow conscious consumption bloggers do not—Conscious fashion blogging is still just fashion blogging, not environmental activism.

What About Reducing and Reusing?

Conscious consumption isn’t all about buying things; sometimes it’s about not buying things. For every few blog posts about where to shop consciously, there is a mention of consumption alternatives—we should remember to reduce our impact by buying fewer things and reuse the things we already have. Conceptually, reducing and

⁶⁴ Use Less [Signe Hansen], 2017, comment on “Conscious Consumerism is a Lie?”

⁶⁵ Shelbizleee [Shelbi Orme], 2017, comment on “Conscious Consumerism is a Lie?”

⁶⁶ Steinberg, *Who Rules the Earth?* 5.

reusing are great ways to conserve resources. The point of purchasing reusable canvas bags and glass bottles is to buy something once and never have to buy it again. This point is muddled when bloggers recommend a new brand of reusable bottle or bag each month. But these strategies are presented as supplementary to the conscious lifestyle. After all, says Polowy, “we need to buy things.”⁶⁷ In Leotsakou’s New Year’s resolutions video she suggests we simply “switch from supporting fast fashion brands to supporting ethical brands.”⁶⁸ But for those on a budget, Leotsakou recommends “thrifting, swapping with friends, and even making your own clothes if you know how to do that.” In her view, not having to resort to anticapitalist strategies is a privilege associated with higher economic status. If you can buy clothes at full price, do that. If not, thrift. Her blog is about how to *consume* consciously— how to decide which clothes to buy, not how to sew or repair the clothes. She simply mentions those options for people who are too poor to buy their way out of the problem. Furthermore, her recommendations are still individualistic. Conscious consumption blogs rarely, if ever, suggest collaboration, discussion, or mutual sharing of knowledge.

It’s hard to imagine that, having faced criticism like Wicker’s, coupled with the growing urgency of the American political climate, the conscious consumption movement will be able to continue business as usual for much longer. There is a frustratingly obvious mismatch in scale between environmental problems, like global climate change, and the small solutions offered by conscious consumption.⁶⁹ Those

⁶⁷ Polowy, “Conscious Consumerism is a Lie?”

⁶⁸ Leotsakou, “4 Resolutions You Need To Set For 2018!”

⁶⁹ Steinberg, *Who Rules the Earth?* 5.

wishing to see change must look upstream to the structural impediments to sustainability, which have more to do with concentrations of power than individual consumer choice.

In many cases it's appropriate to critique and confront the large corporations responsible for environmental degradation.⁷⁰ But to conscious consumers it may be hard to imagine doing so outside of a consumption context. Leotsakou has several videos meant to convince followers not to buy products from companies like Nestlé, Apple, Zara, Kellogg, Kraft, Coca Cola, Johnson & Johnson, Mars, PepsiCo and General Mills. "And these of course are not the only brands that I boycott," says Leotsakou.⁷¹ There are positives and negatives to this type of message. On the one hand, Leotsakou uses the word "boycott" when she really means sustained personal purchasing habits over time. On the other hand, a citizen-led sustainability politics must target environmental problems at the level of institutions and hold corporations accountable for their practices.⁷² Leotsakou offers a consumer "boycott" of Nestlé's products as the only response to the company's bad behavior, but at least she frames the problem as one of unregulated corporate greed rather than overconsumption by individuals.

Though their overall message is far from political, bloggers occasionally mention politics in contexts outside consumption. In Polowy's New Year's resolutions video, she mentions that her own 2018 resolution is to "get more involved at a political level" and support environmental organizations. In the only other instance across all six videos where the word "political" appears, Leotsakou says

⁷⁰ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 206-7.

⁷¹ Leotsakou, "3 Popular Companies that HATE You"

⁷² Naomi Klein, *No is Not Enough: Resisting the New Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need* (Knopf Canada, 2017).

start shopping consciously— not only for the environment, but also for political reasons... I don't support big multinational corporations because they pay zero to around 4% tax... support your small local conscious businesses instead of big multinational corporations.⁷³

Leotsakou sees conscious consumption as accomplishing two separate, unrelated goals—to her, refusing to buy name brand products from multinational corporations is both a form of depoliticized environmentalism and, separately, a personal political protest against low corporate taxes. This suggests she sees environmentalism as distinct from politics, whereas she views corporate tax issues a “political reason” to shop consciously.

All things considered, monthly haul videos and product reviews are hardly radical mechanisms for change— even when said products are reusable. Still, the conscious consumption blogging community is rich with nuanced, if not contradictory, understandings of sustainability. Some are primarily concerned with natural, non-toxic products, some are fashion-conscious, some want to produce zero waste, and some are focused on interventionist technological strategies. Still others are extreme minimalists, who want to go off the grid entirely and be self-sustaining without markets. Sustainability is not widely understood as measurable; it can be enacted through a person's performed self and lifestyle (in this case through purchases or lack of purchases).⁷⁴ What help is it to environmentalism for the conscious consumption movement to mention anti capitalist tactics without an anti capitalist framing? Conscious consumption's potential for politicization may lie not in its current tactics but in the networks and relationships that comprise it.

⁷³ Leotsakou, “4 Resolutions You Need To Set For 2018!”

⁷⁴ Margaret O'Shea, “Embodying and performing sustainability” (University of British Columbia, 2012) 48.

A Sense of Community

Decline in civic life is one possible explanation for the increased narrowing of the responsibility we feel towards enacting social change. According to political scientist Robert Putnam, political change requires social capital, which is a resource rooted in community relationships.⁷⁵ He blames today's lack of social capital on changes in the American economy, workplace, and built environment, but notes that some of it may have moved from physical spaces to the Internet.⁷⁶ Maniates agrees, but clarifies the digital sphere is no substitute for civic life when our daily habits are depoliticized:

the increasing fragmentation and mobility of everyday life undermines our sense of neighborhood and community, separating us from the small arenas in which we might practice and refine our abilities as citizens... Modern-day advances in entertainment and communication increasingly find us sitting alone in front of a screen, making it all seem fine. We do our political bit in the election booth, then get back to 'normal.'⁷⁷

Without a doubt, the constituencies of the conscious consumption blogosphere are sitting alone in front of screens. However, online communities formed by conscious consumption blogs may have the right idea, just the wrong execution. In forums, discussion boards, and comments sections is the embedded knowledge that change happens via the collective, wherein people work together, discuss openly, compromise, and move towards action as a group. In effect, conscious consumption substitutes online community— comprised of people all over the world who already share similar demographics, privileges, and values—for tangible community—wherein people from

⁷⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (Simon and Schuster, 2001) 89, 148, 177.

⁷⁶ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 169-180.

⁷⁷ Maniates, "Individualization," 38.

different backgrounds must come together over issues that immediately affect their shared environment and daily lives. Steinberg writes that our local communities are

the places we identify with and can most readily affect. The rules that we build or dismantle locally determine whether we protect green spaces or cover every inch with pavement, whether we have attractive urban centers where people actually want to hang out, or sterile strip malls...towns, cities, states, and provinces are a logical focus of political action for those who are ready to move beyond feel-good Earth Day celebrations and make a sustained push for sustainability.⁷⁸

A place-based approach to environmental organizing matters because of what is at stake: air and water quality, land use, quality of life, community green space, safe and accessible public transport, and healthy food are just a few examples.⁷⁹ These things cannot be improved through a person's online purchases. Rather, they require collective decision making, trust building, forums for discussion and debate, and a willingness to navigate channels of power at neighborhood, city and state levels.

⁷⁸ Steinberg, *Who Rules the Earth?* 185.

⁷⁹ Klein, "Love Will Save This Place" in *This Changes Everything*, 337-366.

CONCLUSION

The main narrative of conscious consumption blogs— that consumption is activism— is in fact a depoliticized way to place disproportionate value on consumptive acts. While sustainability is its purported goal, conscious consumption fails to critique the systems of power responsible for environmental degradation, instead upholding them through glorification of consumer sovereignty, blindness to privilege, and individualization of responsibility. In a political, structures-oriented environmentalism, personal conscious consumption rituals could serve a symbolic function— acting as signals of environmentalist values. Still, the current conscious consumption movement could use a shift in perspective toward citizenship.

Calling Conscious Consumption What It Is

Instagram posts and feel-good advertisements for sustainable products must not constrict our sense of agency or distract us from a whole-systems understanding. This is not to say that no sort of environmental action can be accomplished under neoliberalism, or that our concern is worthless. If anything, our anxiety over moralized consumption is misplaced. We agonize over whether the things we buy are sustainable, so that our leisure activities become joyless. We should ask not *how can I make myself sustainable?* but *how can my community make itself sustainable?* Through community we must introduce joy into the sustainable lifestyle concept, replacing personal guilt with collective problem solving, including in instances regarding the aesthetic choices we so love to make.

When it comes to consumption, environmentalism could use more of a healthy skepticism of capitalism's deceiving "have it all" mantra. True, conscious consumption

can affect lives— TOMS® provides shoes to those in need, and JUST funds water infrastructure in New York.^{80 81} But relying on the market to provide environmental and humanitarian solutions means failing to address the systems which produced those problems in the first place. Rather than engaging with the politics or regulation of greenhouse gas emissions, fertilizer runoff, or plastic waste, conscious consumption blogs would have you drive a hybrid vehicle, eat organic food, and carry around a reusable straw. Of course, upstream thinking shouldn't necessarily invalidate those practices. For better or worse, conscious consumption has become a symbol of sustainability. Most environmentalists probably couldn't drive a gas guzzling vehicle or toss away a plastic bag in good conscience. Still, we must learn to either separate our conscience from our sense of agency, or expand our individual concerns to form a collective conscience whose focus is systemic change— in other words, take the “conscious” out of conscious consumption and use it in a better way. That same consciousness is its own form of the social capital Putnam describes, ripe with the potential to fuel a sustained, citizen-led movement. To put that social capital to use may involve continued knowledge sharing and awareness raising through online networks, but it must also emphasize place-based environmental change.

Reimagining Sustainability in the Political Realm

Much of the way forward depends on how define sustainability. If conscious consumption blogs are any evidence, sustainability is too often misunderstood as a

⁸⁰ Denis Mugendi, "Corporate social responsibility at TOMS shoes" (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2017).

⁸¹ Kate Taylor, "Jaden Smith Wants to Be the Elon Musk of Bottled Water - and It Could Revolutionize a \$16 Billion Industry" (*Business Insider*, February 23, 2018).

consumer lifestyle, its mechanism being depoliticized market power. This understanding blatantly ignores the larger institutional forces which have always had the most power in shaping economies, humans' environmental impact, and consumer behavior itself.

Depoliticized sustainability champions individuals, not communities; it sees consumers, not citizens. This view makes organizing against institutions of power seem not only impossible, but also irrelevant.

On the other hand, if sustainability could be understood as a political goal, focus on the individual would become secondary to collective action. To accomplish the real work of environmentalism, individuals must define themselves primarily as citizens of a community, region, and/or nation, wherein the primary mechanism of change is oppositional politics. We need not start from scratch: scholars like Klein, McKibben and Steinberg all tell us exactly what needs to be done. Klein emphasizes that sustainability is crucially entangled with inequalities in the USA that need to be addressed through social justice, environmental justice, and political and economic reform.⁸² In addition to doing our part at the polls, environmentalists might take an interest in any number of local manifestations of these issues: public transport, bike lanes, funding for education, environmental protections, food access, water and waste treatment infrastructure, and land zoning laws are just a small few. In the meantime, we might obsess a little less over what brand of toothpaste to buy.

⁸² Klein, *No Is Not Enough*

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APPENDIX

Results of word cloud language frequency generator. Displayed are all words that appear at least 25 times. Number to the left of each word indicates how many times that word appears out of 85,742 words. Words in bold are my own emphasis. Words which appear multiple times with different suffixes are combined into one entry. (cont.)

807	just	107	feel	70	hope
704	like	107	love	69	link
687	really	106	will	68	year
419	can	105	stuff	67	nice
366	one	104	work	67	last
362	also	104	take	66	waste
323	think	103	water	66	quite
322	know	102	sort	66	many
306	things	100	pretty	64	important
288	kind	99	try	64	long
245	make	97	put	63	making
243	want	93	day	62	eas (-ier, -ily)
239	get	92	always	62	wear
234	lot	91	sustainable(-ly, -ility)	61	brand
220	little	91	vegan(-s -ism)	61	found
212	going	90	fashion	61	years
211	people	90	ethics(-al -ally)	61	eat
210	something	90	look	59	brands
210	gonna	89	sure	59	wanted
199	actually	88	around	57	started
199	well	87	keep	57	instead
197	now	86	maybe	56	health(-y, -ier)
194	much	86	comes	56	anything
192	use	86	life	56	thought
185	got	85	trying	55	bought
174	way	85	new	55	company(-ies)
167	bit	82	basically	55	happy(-er, -ness)
164	video	81	used	55	best
164	made	80	everything	54	natural
152	time	79	still	53	together
147	thing	79	next	53	personal(-ly)
135	product(s)	77	might	53	give
134	see	75	another	52	come
131	good	75	called	51	support(-s, -ing)
125	great	75	better	51	already
124	find	75	shop(-ping)	51	ever
111	different	75	every	50	especially
111	using	75	say	50	sometimes
110	plastic	74	super	50	today
110	even	74	back	50	whole
109	buy	72	right	50	week
109	clothes (-ing)	71	organic	49	never
107	first	70	probably	49	zero
107	need				

(cont.) Results of word cloud language frequency generator.

49	said	38	issue(s)	30	living
48	watching	38	care	30	diet
48	looking	38	help	30	else
48	bag	38	blog	30	huge
47	secondhand	38	ones	30	job
47	wearing	37	channel	29	eco-friendly
47	working	37	powder	29	often
46	show	37	thank	29	able
45	learn(-ing, -ed)	37	less	29	big
45	style	37	old	28	interesting
45	mean	36	place	28	impact(s)
45	away	36	small	28	though
45	box	36	hair	28	cotton
44	makeup	35	ingredients	28	person
44	change	35	lifestyle	28	eating
44	works	35	mascara	28	tried
44	part	35	enough	28	end
44	home	35	point	28	cut
43	obviously	35	let	27	without
43	since	34	videos	27	summer
43	food	34	looks	27	number
43	free	34	money	27	bottle
42	buying	34	skin	27	check
42	guess	34	book	27	enjoy
42	meat	33	perfect	27	glass
41	everyone	33	healthy	27	color
41	course	33	leather	27	bags
41	brush	33	either	27	face
41	makes	33	post	26	option(s)
41	soda	33	gift	26	someone
40	completely	33	talk	26	general
40	husband	33	cool	26	entire
40	idea	32	packaging	26	bring
39	beautiful	32	usually	26	body
39	getting	32	saying	26	seen
39	start	32	soap	26	top
39	done	32	bad	25	positive
39	read	31	share	25	favorite
39	ago	31	save	25	cleaning
38	conscious(-ly)	31	oil	25	awesome
38	consume(-r, -ers, -ption, -ing)	31	cup	25	process
38	couple	30	example	25	month
		30	vintage	25	phone
		30	coffee	25	hard